

RICH MAN'S STREET

written by

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FADE IN:

INT. ADEYEMI PENTHOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Floor-to-ceiling windows overlook a glittering Lagos skyline, a whole city of small lit windows stacked into the dark. A birthday cake sits half eaten on a long marble table, nine candles melted down to waxy stubs. Balloons sag in the corner, already dying, the helium long gone out of them.

ZOE ADEYEMI (9), still wearing a paper crown gone soft at the folds, sits cross legged on the floor, scrolling through photos on a tablet. She is dressed for a party that never quite started. Alone.

ESTHER ADEYEMI (42) stands at the window, arms folded, watching her own reflection more than the view outside. She has the stillness of a woman who has learned to wait without appearing to.

Behind them, DAMIAN ADEYEMI (45), tall, immaculate even at this hour, paces near the hallway, phone pressed to his ear, entirely somewhere else. A driver's cap and car keys sit by the door, ready for his next departure.

DAMIAN

(into phone)

No. No, tell Bello I am not signing at that valuation. Tell him I built three malls before he learned how to spell developer.

He walks past Zoe without once looking down at her. She does not even flinch anymore. This, we understand, is simply how the evenings go.

ESTHER

(quiet, not really to him)

She waited for you to blow out the candles with her. We lit them twice.

DAMIAN

(hand over phone)

I will make it up to her this weekend. I promise.

He is already walking away, phone back to his ear, the promise already spent.

DAMIAN (CONT'D)

Yes. I am listening. Go on.

Esther watches him disappear down the hallway, his voice fading into another room, another deal, another life running parallel to this one. Zoe leans in and blows out an invisible candle on the tablet screen. Alone, and used to it.

ZOE

(small)

Happy birthday to me.

Esther crosses the room and sits beside her daughter on the cold marble floor, saying nothing, simply being there, which is more than the room has offered all evening.

INT. ADEYEMI CAPITAL HOLDINGS - DAMIAN'S OFFICE - DAY

A glass corner office on the fortieth floor, all sharp angles and harder light. Screens tick with numbers nobody in the room actually needs to read anymore, they have become wallpaper. Under a spotlight sits a gleaming architectural model, EKO DIAMOND TOWERS, three shining spires rising out of a miniature Lagos.

CHIDO NWACHUKWU (30s), sharp suit, anxious eyes, enters with a folder pressed to his chest like it might protect him.

CHIDO

Sir, the board wants assurance before Friday. We have borrowed against almost everything to fund this project. The land, the old properties, even the penthouse is collateral now.

DAMIAN

(not looking up)

Because it is the only project that matters. When Eko Diamond opens, my name sits on this skyline forever. Nobody remembers the man who played it safe, Chido.

CHIDO

And if the pre-sales do not close in time to cover the loan?

DAMIAN

They will close. They always do. I started with nothing but a scholarship and a bus fare. I did not get here by being careful.

On the shelf behind him, half hidden by a glass trophy engraved BUILDER OF THE YEAR, a framed photo gathers a fine layer of dust, Esther and Zoe, younger, laughing at the beach. He has not looked at it in months. He does not look at it now.

His phone buzzes against the desk. He answers before it finishes ringing, the photo forgotten instantly, the way it always is.

DAMIAN (CONT'D)

Talk to me.

Chido lingers a moment, watching his boss vanish into the call, then quietly lets himself out. On his way, he passes a wall of framed magazine covers, DAMIAN ADEYEMI, THE MAN WHO BUILT LAGOS TWICE, each one a little larger than the last.

The model towers glow under their spotlight, three small monuments to a man's certainty, in a room with no clock on any wall, because time, here, is not something Damian Adeyemi has ever believed applies to him.

INT. ADEYEMI CAPITAL HOLDINGS - BOARDROOM - DAY

A long glass table. Six BOARD MEMBERS in dark suits, laptops open, faces unreadable. DAMIAN stands at the head, a laser pointer tracing across a projected chart climbing steadily upward and to the right.

DAMIAN

Eko Diamond Towers is not a risk.
It is the safest bet any of you
will make this decade. Three
towers, four hundred units, sold
before the concrete is dry.

An older board member, ADAEZE OKONJO (60s), unmoved by the theatre of it, taps her pen against the table.

ADAEZE

You said the same about the Lekki
project. We are still waiting on
that one.

DAMIAN

(a flash of irritation,
quickly smoothed)
The Lekki project made every one of
you money. This one will make you
rich.

ADAEZE

There is a difference between rich
and overexposed, Mr. Adeyemi.

A silence. Damian smiles the smile of a man who has never
once lost an argument in this room.

DAMIAN

Trust me. I have never once been
wrong about what this city wants.

He clicks to the next slide. Nobody notices that the numbers,
for the very first time, are built almost entirely on hope.

INT. ADEYEMI PENTHOUSE - STUDY - NIGHT

Papers and a laptop glow blue across Damian's face. ESTHER
enters, finds him exactly where she expects to.

ESTHER

Zoe asked me today if you still
remember what she looks like.

DAMIAN

(not looking up)
That is not funny, Esther.

ESTHER

It was not a joke. It was a
question.

He finally looks up.

DAMIAN

Everything I am doing, I am doing
for the two of you. This tower
changes everything for this family.

ESTHER

We did not need a tower, Damian. We
needed you at a birthday party.

Silence. He looks back down at the laptop. As far as he is
concerned, the conversation has ended.

Esther lingers in the doorway a moment longer, waiting for
something, anything, a word that might change the shape of
the evening.

ESTHER (CONT'D)

Do you remember when you used to
sketch buildings on napkins because
we could not afford real paper?

(MORE)

ESTHER (CONT'D)

You used to show me every single one, like it was the only thing in the world worth showing me.

DAMIAN

(a flicker, quickly buried under numbers again)
That was a different life, Esther.

ESTHER

(quiet, leaving)
One day the money will still be here. We will not be.

She exits. Damian sits alone in a dark room, lit only by numbers on a screen, the napkin sketches, if they still exist anywhere, buried under twenty years of blueprints he actually got to build.

INT. ADEYEMI CAPITAL HOLDINGS - DAMIAN'S OFFICE - DAY

Weeks later. CHIDO bursts in without knocking, a first. Behind him, through the glass wall, the office has gone strangely quiet, phones ringing unanswered at empty desks.

CHIDO

Sir, the Eko Diamond pre-sales fell through. The lead investor pulled out this morning. The banks are calling in the loans.

DAMIAN

(standing, still calm)
Get Bello on the phone. Get everyone on the phone.

CHIDO

I tried, sir. Nobody is picking up. It is already on the news.

Damian grabs his own phone and dials, hand steadier than his face. It rings out. He dials again. Nothing. A third call goes straight to voicemail, a voice he has trusted with everything, gone silent overnight.

He moves to the window. Far below, cranes stand frozen over the half built towers. Workers are already walking off the site, small as ants, carrying their tools home for good.

DAMIAN

(quiet)
Everything is tied to that tower.

CHIDO

(barely audible)
Everything, sir.

A long beat. His reflection hangs in the glass, a small man against a skyline that no longer belongs to him.

CHIDO (CONT'D)

(hesitant)
Sir, what do we tell the staff?

DAMIAN

(not turning around)
Tell them the truth. Tell them I
built this whole thing on a bet I
was so sure I could not lose that I
never once considered what would
happen if I did.

Chido does not know what to say to that. Nobody in this building has ever heard Damian Adeyemi admit to being wrong about anything. He leaves quietly, closing the door behind him like a man leaving a hospital room.

INT. ADEYEMI PENTHOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Moving day. Two MOVERS carry out furniture piece by piece. Esther holds a box of Zoe's things. Zoe watches a stranger carry her canopy bed through the front door.

ZOE

Where is my bed going?

ESTHER

(gently)
Someone else needs it now, baby.

Damian steps forward to help lift a box and fumbles it. A MOVER takes it from him, carefully, the way you take something from someone who has never had to carry his own weight.

MOVER

I have got it, sir.

Damian stands in the empty living room. Sunlight pours through bare windows that no longer have curtains to soften it. His own footsteps echo now, a sound the apartment never used to make when it was full.

He notices, propped against a wall, the framed beach photo from his office, brought home at some point without his noticing, glass cracked in one corner from the move.

ESTHER

(tired, not cruel)
 My sister has a room for me and
 Zoe. You should go and stay with
 your mother's people. On Ajata
 Street.

DAMIAN

(a memory surfacing,
 unwelcome)
 Ajata Street. I have not set foot
 there in twenty five years.

ESTHER

Then maybe it is time.

She takes Zoe's hand and walks out. Damian stands alone in the apartment that used to be his entire life, now just an empty room with good light.

FADE IN:**EXT. AJATA STREET - DAY**

A different Lagos entirely. Narrow lanes between zinc roofed houses, generators humming under the heat, hawkers calling out prices in a rhythm as old as the street itself. A pack of children kick a homemade ball of tied polythene bags across the road, shrieking with a joy that costs nothing.

DAMIAN drags a single suitcase over broken pavement, his once crisp shirt now wrinkled, sweat rings under his arms. He stops, gets his bearings, lost in a place he used to know by heart and now barely recognizes.

An OKADA swerves around him at the last second, the rider shouting over his shoulder without slowing down.

OKADA RIDER

Oga, look where you are going!

Damian jumps back and apologizes without thinking, a man used to giving orders now learning, badly, to give way.

A WOMAN balances a tray of groundnuts on her head, weaving past him without breaking stride. A YOUNG MAN washes a car with a bucket and a rag, singing to himself, off key and unbothered.

Damian passes a faded blue wall, half a house number still visible beneath new graffiti and years of rain. He stops and stares at it a long moment, something tightening in his chest.

DAMIAN

(to himself)

It used to be blue.

A woman he does not recognize now lives behind that door, laundry strung across what was once his mother's window. He keeps walking. Smaller with every step, the suitcase suddenly twice as heavy as it was an hour ago.

Somewhere behind him, children start up a chant for a game he half remembers the words to. He does not turn around. Not yet.

EXT. MAMA CHIDI'S FOOD STAND - DAY

MAMA CHIDI (65), broad and warm, headscarf tied high, presides over a smoking pot of akara and a bench of regulars trading gossip over steam. She clocks Damian loitering at a distance, hungry, ashamed of being hungry, a new kind of shame for him.

MAMA CHIDI

You. Standing there since morning
like you are window shopping for
air. Sit down.

DAMIAN

I do not have any money on me right
now, ma.

MAMA CHIDI

(already serving him)

Did I ask you for money?

She sets a plate in front of him. He hesitates. Then eats, really eats, the way a man eats who has not tasted food that was not garnished by a hotel in a very long time.

MAMA CHIDI (CONT'D)

You have that face. The face of
somebody who used to be somebody.

DAMIAN

(low)

I do not know what I am anymore.

MAMA CHIDI

(laughs, not unkind)
 Ah. Welcome to Ajata Street. Half
 of us do not know either. We still
 wake up.

He almost smiles. The first time in the whole story.

DAMIAN

I am looking for my mother's old
 compound. The Adeyemi place. Do you
 know it?

MAMA CHIDI

(studying him, realization
 dawning)
 Adeyemi. You are Iya Damian's boy.
 The one who left for university and
 became big big man?

DAMIAN

(ashamed)
 That was a long time ago.

MAMA CHIDI

Baba Tunji is still here. Go and
 meet him first, before you go
 looking for ghosts.

She points down the street and ladles more food onto his
 plate without being asked.

MAMA CHIDI (CONT'D)

Eat first. Big decisions should
 never be made on an empty stomach.

One of the regulars on the bench, an old man with a
 transistor radio pressed to his ear, glances up at Damian
 without much interest, then goes back to the football
 commentary crackling out of the speaker. Nobody here knows or
 cares who he used to be. There is a strange relief in that,
 one Damian has not yet learned to name.

EXT. BABA TUNJI'S WORKSHOP - DAY

A cluttered mechanic's yard, engine parts everywhere, an old
 radio playing highlife just loud enough to fight the traffic
 noise. BABA TUNJI (70), lean, oil stained hands, looks up
 from an engine and freezes.

BABA TUNJI

(disbelief)
 Is this not Damian? Emeka's son?

DAMIAN

Baba Tunji.

They embrace, awkward at first, then real.

BABA TUNJI

Your father would not recognize this face. So thin. So tired. Where is the boy who used to race the danfo buses down this road for fun?

DAMIAN

He is gone, Baba. I lost everything.

BABA TUNJI

(unbothered, wiping his hands)
Everything, or just money?

DAMIAN

Is there a difference?

Baba Tunji laughs, a real belly laugh, and gestures around his modest yard. Behind it, a small home, alive with potted plants, a wife's voice calling from inside, grandchildren's laughter drifting out.

BABA TUNJI

I have fixed cars on this street for forty five years. I have never once owned the car I was fixing. And still, look at me. I sleep well. I eat well. My grandchildren climb on me like I am a tree.

He fixes Damian with a look that is not unkind, only honest.

BABA TUNJI (CONT'D)

You built towers, and you cannot even look your own daughter in the eye. Which one of us is the poor man?

A small girl, BABA TUNJI'S GRANDDAUGHTER (5), toddles out and wraps herself around his leg without a word, simply because he is there and she wanted to be near him. He scoops her up without breaking stride, still talking.

BABA TUNJI (CONT'D)

This one does not know I am poor. Nobody ever told her. I am hoping nobody ever does.

The girl reaches out and grabs a fistful of Damian's shirt, curious about the stranger, entirely unafraid of him in a way none of his own security staff ever were.

Damian has no answer. Baba Tunji claps him on the shoulder, already moving on.

BABA TUNJI (CONT'D)

Sit. There is a room out back you can have. It is small. Everything here is small. You will survive it.

INT. BABA TUNJI'S BACK ROOM - NIGHT

A narrow room, a thin mattress on the floor, a single bulb swinging gently from a wire. No air conditioning, no city glow through curtains, only the sounds of the street breathing through a cracked window, generators, distant music, a baby crying somewhere, then quiet again.

DAMIAN lies awake, staring at a ceiling stained with old water marks shaped like nothing and everything. His phone, dead for two days now, sits useless on the floor beside him.

He turns his head. On the wall, faded and half peeling, a child's height chart is still marked in pencil, names and dates climbing upward. One of the names, small and careful, reads DAMIAN, AGE 7.

He reaches out and touches the mark with two fingers, the way a man touches something he is not sure is real.

DAMIAN

(a whisper, almost a laugh)

I used to be this small.

Somewhere outside, Baba Tunji's wife hums an old church hymn while washing plates in a metal basin. Damian closes his eyes. For the first time in longer than he can remember, sleep comes easily, without a single number to count.

Outside, the generator hum finally cuts off for the night, the whole street exhaling into a rare and total quiet, broken only by a dog barking somewhere far off, then nothing at all.

EXT. MAMA CHIDI'S FOOD STAND - DAY

Days later. Damian, sleeves rolled up, stands awkwardly beside Mama Chidi's pot, trying to help. He stirs the akara batter too fast, splashing it, entirely out of his depth.

MAMA CHIDI

(swatting his hand away,
laughing)
Ah ah, gently! You are not mixing
cement. This is somebody's
breakfast.

DAMIAN

(sheepish)
I ran a company with four hundred
staff. Nobody told me I could not
stir beans.

MAMA CHIDI

Four hundred staff and you cannot
fry akara. Which one of those
skills feeds a man on a Tuesday?

A CUSTOMER, an old woman with a walking stick, counts out
coins slowly, apologetically, short by a little.

CUSTOMER

Mama, forgive me, I am short today.
I will pay the rest on Thursday.

MAMA CHIDI

(waving her off, already
serving)
Thursday, next week, next year, it
does not matter. Go and eat.

Damian watches this exchange, something recalibrating behind
his eyes. He remembers, with a small jolt of shame, how many
people he once let go over far less than a missed payment.

DAMIAN

(quiet)
You do that for everyone?

MAMA CHIDI

Everyone who is hungry today and
will not be tomorrow. It always
comes back. Maybe not from her.
From somewhere.

She hands Damian a plate of his own, wages for bad help
kindly disguised as a gift.

MAMA CHIDI (CONT'D)

You are learning. Slowly. Like a
man learning to walk again after a
long illness.

A group of schoolchildren in faded uniforms crowd the stand on their way home, counting coins between them for a shared plate. Mama Chidi serves them the same way she serves everyone, without a trace of hurry, without a trace of judgment for how little they have to offer.

EXT. AJATA STREET COURTYARD - DAY

Some days later still. KENNY (11), barefoot, plays football with friends using that same ball of tied plastic bags. Damian watches from the workshop doorway, still a stranger to his own hands.

KENNY

Oga, you want to play?

DAMIAN

I have not played football since I was your age.

KENNY

It is not hard. You just have to want the ball more than the other person wants it.

Damian glances down at his own clothes, the last decent shirt he owns, then back at the boy's open, waiting face. He sets down the wrench he has been pretending to help with and steps out into the sun.

Damian, hesitant, joins. Undignified at first, slipping in the dust, laughing despite himself. Real laughter. The first unguarded moment he has had since the birthday candles went out.

He scores, badly, off his shin. The kids cheer anyway. He throws his arms up like he has just closed a deal worth a billion naira, and for once he means it more.

KENNY (CONT'D)

(grinning)

See? You are rich now.

DAMIAN

(catching his breath,
laughing)

With what?

KENNY

(already running off to
play)

I do not know. You just look rich.

Damian stands in the dusty courtyard, sweating, grinning, richer somehow than he has felt in years.

The sun dips lower behind the rooftops, painting the whole courtyard the color of the cake candles from the first night, though Damian could not tell you why that thought crosses his mind just now, only that it does, gently, and does not hurt the way it used to.

INT. MAMA CHIDI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A small house, full to the walls. Mama Chidi, Baba Tunji, Kenny, and neighbors crowd around a modest meal, sharing from common plates, trading stories, laughter overlapping laughter. Damian sits folded into this ordinary richness, unsure where to put his hands.

Someone asks him to tell a story from his big man days. He starts to, out of old habit, boasting, then stops halfway through.

DAMIAN

(quieter, real)

I used to have breakfast meetings
that cost more than everyone's food
in this room combined tonight. I
cannot remember one single thing
anyone said in any of them.

A beat.

DAMIAN (CONT'D)

I already remember this table. And
I have only been here five minutes.

Mama Chidi watches him and nods slowly. She does not need to say anything.

BABA TUNJI

(raising his cup)

To the boy who came home.

The table murmurs the toast back. Damian cannot speak. He just nods, eyes wet, something in him breaking open quietly, without any drama at all.

Kenny, mouth full of rice, points his spoon at Damian.

KENNY

Oga, is it true you used to fly in
an airplane just for you? Alone?
With no other person inside?

DAMIAN

(a small, embarrassed
laugh)
It is true.

KENNY

(genuinely baffled)
Why would you want to fly alone?
Flying is only fun if somebody is
there to be afraid with you.

The table erupts in laughter, Damian's loudest of all, a laugh that surprises even him on the way out.

Later, alone outside under a bare bulb, the party still glowing warm behind him, he takes out a cracked, borrowed phone and stares at it for a long time.

EXT. AJATA STREET - RECHARGE CARD STALL - DAY

Damian stands at a roadside stall, phone pressed to his ear, the line ringing.

DAMIAN

Esther. It is me.

ESTHER (V.O.)

(guarded)
I heard you went back to Ajata
Street.

DAMIAN

I did. I am still here.

A beat.

DAMIAN (CONT'D)

I do not have anything to offer you
right now. No tower. No name on any
skyline. I just wanted to ask how
Zoe's spelling test went. The one
on Friday.

A long silence on the line. We can feel Esther on the other end, surprised, moved.

ESTHER (V.O.)

(softer)
She got fourteen out of fifteen.

DAMIAN

(smiling, eyes wet)
Only fourteen? We will have to work
on that.

ESTHER (V.O.)

(almost laughing)
We?

DAMIAN

If you will let me.

A pause on the line, the kind that used to fill Damian with dread when a deal hung in the balance. This one feels different. This one feels like something opening rather than closing.

ESTHER (V.O.)

There is a school play in three weeks. She is a tree. She has one line.

DAMIAN

(already grinning)
What does the tree say?

ESTHER (V.O.)

(a real laugh, the first
in the whole script)
You will have to come and hear it
yourself.

DAMIAN

I will be there. Whatever it takes,
I will be there.

For once, it is a promise he has no deal, no tower, no billion naira excuse standing between him and keeping.

FADE OUT

FADE IN:

INT. ESTHER'S FLAT - DAY

Weeks later. A small, modest rented flat, sunlight through a single window, nothing marble about it, and somehow warmer for it. ZOE does homework at a small table, tongue poking out in concentration. Esther irons a school uniform nearby, humming to herself.

A knock at the door. Esther opens it. DAMIAN stands there, thinner, in simple clothes that fit the man he is becoming rather than the one he was, holding a small paper bag.

ZOE

(looking up)
Daddy?

DAMIAN

(kneeling to her height)
I brought you something. It is not much. It is the best akara in Lagos, though. Mama Chidi made it herself.

Zoe takes the bag carefully, peers inside, then looks at him properly. Really looks.

ZOE

You smell different.

DAMIAN

(laughing softly)
Good different, or bad different?

ZOE

(considering, honest)
Different good.

Esther watches from the doorway, arms no longer crossed. Something in the room has shifted.

ESTHER

Do you want to come in? We were just about to go over her spelling.

DAMIAN

(quiet, grateful)
I would like that more than anything.

He steps inside, careful, like a man entering a church he is not sure will still let him in. He sits beside Zoe, peers at her workbook.

ZOE

It is words that sound the same but mean different things. Like flower and flour.

DAMIAN

(genuinely delighted)
Homophones. I remember these.

(MORE)

DAMIAN (CONT'D)

Your grandmother used to test me on the veranda before I could go outside and play.

ZOE

Did you get them right?

DAMIAN

(smiling)

Not even close. But she never let me stop trying.

Esther watches the two of them lean over the small table, heads bowed together, and allows herself, for the first time in a long time, to hope without immediately bracing for the disappointment that usually follows it.

On the wall behind them, taped up with too much tape, is a drawing Zoe made weeks ago, three stick figures holding hands under a sun with too many rays. Nobody has ever mentioned it out loud. Nobody needs to.

He steps further inside. The door closes gently on a small, warm room, three people at a small table, which is, it turns out, exactly the size a family needs to be.

EXT. AJATA STREET - DAY

Months later. Sunday afternoon. Ajata Street alive as ever, generators humming, hawkers calling, children shrieking somewhere over a game. Damian walks down the street, no suitcase this time, holding Zoe's hand. Esther beside him, carrying a small covered dish, a contribution, not a purchase.

They arrive at Mama Chidi's stand. Introductions all around.

MAMA CHIDI

So this is the famous Zoe. Fourteen out of fifteen.

ZOE

(proud)

Fifteen out of fifteen now.

MAMA CHIDI

(delighted)

Ah! Then you eat for free today.

Baba Tunji waves from his workshop, wrench raised like a greeting flag. Kenny runs up, ball already in hand, taller than the last time we saw him, the way children are always slightly ahead of the story.

KENNY

Oga! You want to play? Bring your daughter this time.

Zoe looks up at Damian, hopeful, already halfway to yes. He glances at Esther, who nods, smiling, no longer the smile of a woman being patient with him.

DAMIAN

(to Zoe)

Come. Let me show you something I only just learned myself.

They join the game in the street, dust rising gold in the late afternoon light. Zoe kicks the plastic bag ball wide, laughs at herself before anyone else can, chases it down anyway. Damian goes after it too, barefoot now, his shoes abandoned by the roadside without a second thought.

Esther watches from the roadside with Mama Chidi, both women smiling at the sight, the small covered dish forgotten between them, going cold, nobody minding at all.

MAMA CHIDI

(to Esther)

He is rich now, you know.

ESTHER

(watching Damian laugh,
chase the ball, badly,
joyfully)

Yes. I can see that.

Kenny steals the ball from Damian with a laugh, Zoe steals it back from Kenny, and for a moment the whole street is just noise and dust and delight, nobody keeping score of anything at all.

Baba Tunji leans in his doorway, watching, his granddaughter propped on his hip, and lifts a hand toward Damian, not quite a wave, more the quiet acknowledgement of one man to another across a distance that has finally closed.

Final image: Damian, barefoot in the dust, arms out, laughing, his daughter beside him, her small hand finding his without needing to be asked. Far behind them, past the rooftops, the city skyline he once tried to own catches the last of the light, small now, and entirely beside the point.

The generators hum. The evening call to prayer drifts faintly from somewhere down the road. A street that never had very much keeps giving away everything that matters.

FADE OUT.

THE END